

# Los Angeles Times

## Believe in the bullet train

**Even though it's a gamble, high-speed rail would help California cope with its transportation problems.**

May 2, 2007

IT'S TEMPTING to write off California's bullet-train enthusiasts as overgrown kids begging Mom and Dad for cash to build the world's coolest train set; only in this case, Mom and Dad are the taxpayers, and the set would cost at least \$40 billion. And yet what looks today like an overpriced toy might someday become one of the state's best weapons for fighting gridlock and pollution.

Rail boosters and transit realists have been butting heads for more than a decade over plans for a bullet train from Sacramento to San Diego, a 200-mph electric-powered rocket that could go from Los Angeles to San Francisco in 2 1/2 hours. Plans to put the train project before voters have been put off twice, and if Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger gets his way, a ballot measure planned for November 2008 might once again be deferred. The governor also wants to slash funding to \$1 million for the California High-Speed Rail Authority, which says it needs \$103 million next fiscal year to keep the project on track.

The project would represent a huge gamble for state taxpayers. Even assuming that planners are right about the total price tag — a big assumption given variables such as the price of land — there are no guarantees that all the money can be raised or that rosy projections about the line's ridership and revenue would be met.

The rail authority wants to ask voters to approve \$9.95 billion in bonds next year. Backers say the rest of the money would come from private investors, the federal government and other local sources. But it's possible that investors would shun such a risky project or that the federal money wouldn't materialize. California could conceivably be stuck with a partly built train to nowhere for years or decades. And there are serious questions about whether a high-speed train is such a high priority at a time when the state is already groaning under a perilous debt load and still has many infrastructure needs unfunded.

Yet critics who reject the train as a boondoggle base their arguments on the past, not the future. It's true that long-distance rail systems in this country attract anemic ridership and usually require bottomless taxpayer subsidies. But the unattractive economics of train travel won't necessarily remain that way forever.

By 2020, the projected completion date for the bullet train, gas will likely be a lot more expensive. State and federal governments by that time should be well underway in cutting back sharply on greenhouse gas emissions, probably translated into increased costs for flying or driving. (The bullet train would be emissions-free.) Train service, particularly the kind that could compete with airline travel on convenience, could be far more economically competitive than it is now.

The rail authority is in the midst of preliminary engineering and environmental work that may need to be started over from scratch if funding is pulled next year. It may not need all of the requested \$103 million, but that doesn't justify cutting the project off at the ankles. Voters should get the chance to decide once and for all whether they want their tax dollars tied to the tracks.